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LA SOURCE
By Auguste Renoir

SALON OF THE DILETTANTI—VI

THE CULT OF THE UNWORTHY

It was an old saw, the Observer remarked, that a man was known by the company he kept—and was judged accordingly. He wanted to know if it wasn't logic and equity that an artist should be known by the ideals he lived with—and be welcomed or cut by his friends, the public, according to the tangible evidences of his intimacy. It was bad enough to know—and we all knew it—that muck existed. Was it worth while for an artist to run around with a rake, and then give a pictorial exhibition of his find? Was it worth while for a painter to waste time on any paltry, trivial, unworthy or off-color subject? It was all very well to say that beauty—and there was a certain beauty in everything—was its own excuse for being. It was in fact; but was it in paint, was it in bronze, or marble?

It might be that it was not the function of art to educate, but the Observer had a notion that it was its function to exalt. Was it enough merely to please, or amuse, or merely to surprise? As well say there was no difference in quality—technique, the tricks of the trade, out of the question—between Saint Gaudens's "Sherman," with its rapt note of patriotic devotion, and Biondi's "Saturnalia," with its implied stench of moral rottenness. As well say that Gericault's besotted "Silenus," held on his ass, in drunken rout, was as noble a figure as Holman Hunt's "The Light of the World"—the Christ with His message of "on earth peace, good will to men." In a word, was any work of art worth the pains spent on it when the best thing that could be said of it was, that it was well done?

Had it a worthy meaning, had it an exalted message, did it bring the beholder nearer to nature, or strengthen the ties between man and man, did it chasten the soul or refine the heart, did it open up new vistas of beauty, sentiment, truth? Or did it simply tell a platitude in paint, rehearse a

story from the green room, reflect a side-light from the slums, give an echo of social insanity, depict a pig-stye or canned beef on the hoof, give a section of Sullivan's potato patch with the evidences of drought or bugs? These, the Observer thought, were vital questions, more vital than were usually taken into consideration in art criticism commonly published.

It was the fashion nowadays, the Observer continued, to regard Ruskin as an old woman who took to art criticism for lack of stockings to mend—the implication being that his habit of seeing the inutility of holes in socks made him prone to see the inutility of most art as artists painted it. Nevertheless there was more sanity than scoffing in his classification of artists—“Those who perceive and pursue the good, and leave the evil; those who perceive and pursue the good and evil together, the whole thing as it verily is; and those who perceive and pursue the evil, and leave the good.” As well adopt Lamb's terser classification of mankind into those who borrowed and



UNE LOGE AU THÉÂTRE
By Auguste Renoir.

those who lent, ventured one of the Dilettanti. The Observer admitted that Lamb's classification was equally applicable to artists, but its basis was commercial, and the commercial side of artistic life it was just as well to keep under a screen.

Nothing disconcerted by the interruption, the Observer continued that the first group in Ruskin's category were to be eulogized and emulated; the second were to be tolerated; the third were to be put under key, and the key lost. Art with a taint, art with an innuendo, art with a suggestion of the brutal or bestial, art with a paucity of thought or sentiment was to him bad art, no matter how well it was done; and the artist, who dreamed dreams and saw visions, he thought, should be gauged not by his ability as a *raconteur* in color, but by what he dreamed and saw. Common charity

perhaps, should accord to artists the license of other mortals, but Art should draw the line on muck-heaps and bull-fights, and should never get in its cups.

If the lines were to be drawn as taut as that, one of the Dilettanti objected, it would be the proper thing for all artists to become Sunday school teachers—in studio and out. Not at all, retorted the Observer, for the pictorial Sunday school teachers had been the biggest sinners of the bunch. Nine-tenths of the religious paintings—say a half, if you please—were exhibitions of brutality, gore and the agony that has become religious cant. Nor was the “purpose” picture any more purposeful than the “purpose” novel—it was usually the enterprise of a man who had overestimated or misestimated his mission. All the Observer wanted was that a picture be free from taint, avowed or implied, and that it have a subject big enough and worthy enough to be made a theme for art. He did not care anything about the artist. He might do as he pleased—out of art. David, for instance, was more wedded than wholesome, but he did keep his psalms clean, and it was a great sight better for the world than though he had lived a saint and set pruriency to music. Art in its best sense was the *world's* heritage—its glory or shame—not the *artist's* achievement. *He* was but a craftsman like the rest, and ultimately by his work alone was he known.

It seemed to be the fashion, the Observer went on, for artists, both at home and abroad, to make pictures of all sorts of nodescript, trivial, meaningless, or doubtful subjects, and foist them upon the public—in the name of art—as “studies.” If they were “studies,” why not let them remain “studies”? Were they *art*, simply because their painters chose to see what they could make out of a chance un consequential impression or out of a given set or conglomeration of commonplace circumstances? Were they worthy of public recognition simply as an exhibition of Tom, Dick, or Harry's cleverness? The Observer doubted it, and yet, said he, walk through art store and exhibition hall and note how large a percentage of the offerings lacked the saving grace of *art*—in the broad sense.

At the last Pittsburg exhibition, the Observer recalled, one of the prize-winners was a pretentious nude, several girls minus clothes on a flower-set lawn, though why the ladies should disrobe and play tag in the front yard—in the sacred name of art—it might be difficult to see; one of the honorable mentions was an interior view of a drinking resort, though why the *weinstube* should take precedence over the home circle it was hard to determine; and one of the purchases by the institution was Hoffbauer's “Intense Life”—again the pace that kills, which makes front page stories for the yellow journals. At the staid old Philadelphia Academy this year one of the prize winners was a picture of vaudeville stars whose chief claim to distinction was the hardness of their leg muscles and visages. Just the other day in New York the naked girls who did service down at Pittsburg came into play again and landed a five hundred dollar prize. Beauty in all these? Of course, there was in each an element of beauty, but after all

couldn't the same artists have put into more wholesome subjects an equal element of beauty? Did not artists' liberty too often run into license?

Did Zola tell the world anything it didn't know in "Nana," or George Moore in "Esther Waters," or other writers in the "The Woman Who Did" and "The Woman Who Didn't" and literature of similar stamp? Was the story worth retelling? And so with many of the art works offered to the public. Had Degas added to the world's store of the beautiful by delineating with such anatomical fidelity the abnormal leg muscles and toe formation of the ballet girl? What was a characteristic Vibert? A certain brand of cardinal paint, plus draughtsmanship, plus a suggestion of impropriety too *risque* to be expressed in polite society. Was it worthy? Grützner emphasized the worst side of monastic life, and his saving clause was his good humor. Was it worth while? We were all exercised for a time over



JEUNE FILLE AU PANIER
By Auguste Renoir

the possible destruction of "The Man with a Hoe" in San Francisco, but would Millet's niche in fame be less secure if he had left out of his pictures the manure heaps, and the sweat and the sordidness, and the other evidences of abject, sodden life, and painted the dignity and contentment of humble lot, not its degradation? Would art be the loser if the matador scenes, and cock fights, and drinking bouts, and styes, human and bestial—everything that savored of the inconsequential, the meaningless, the brutal, the sodden was wiped out?

Why should the world have thrust upon it, in the name of art, pictures of deformity, ugliness, obliquity, inanity, mental vacuity, spiritual poverty—anything out of tune with great, righteous manhood and pure, honorable womanhood, with glorious nature, with the full life that should be, but too

often was not? You might paint a sock so natural that it smelled, and after all what would you have? A sock. Or a stye so natural you could fancy the pigs grunting, and after all you would have little more than a suggestion of sausage. Or a \$10 bill so natural that it might pass as legal tender, and for your pains you would be liable to arrest. Or the glare and



MONET PEIGNANT DANS SON JARDIN
By Auguste Renoir

fumes of the pot-house to perfection, and have merely a prophetic symbol of to-morrow's headache. Or any form of low life, degraded habit, besotted condition, brutal practice, meanness, pettiness, sordidness, depravity as man made it and God wouldn't have it, and have mainly an exhibition of personal cleverness, perhaps power—and a sore spot in the heart to rankle, perhaps fester. Or an average nude—there were exceptions—and have simply a suggestion of sex. Apropos of nudes, the Observer recalled, the professor's words to the teacher who asserted the superior authority of lady disciplinarians over boys. "Madam," said he, "it is not the superior authority of the lady teachers, but the recognition of sex by the boys." A thought worth considering by the many painters of the female form divine.

But wasn't an artist justified, one of the Dilettanti asked, in painting

homely scenes and homely people? Assuredly, returned the Observer, if the thing or the person painted had sufficient character to warrant it. The sand dunes of Holland were as instinct with beauty—why didn't the Dutch artists paint them more, and quit, for a time at least, their eternal poverty pictures of cottage interiors, which are all alike?—as the altitudes of the



MARÉE CASSE, YPORT
By Auguste Renoir

Alps; and the flats of Arizona—Groll had shown this—as the heights of the Adirondacks. And as for faces, many a model, silvered by years and lined by experience into benevolence, but lacking all charm but the charm of character, was more exquisitely beautiful than the belles and debutantes, the queens, and near-queens of society. Character, that was the watchword. Sweet sixteen, for instance, was too often a misnomer for simpering sixteen. Many a face lacking curves of beauty but checkered with the witness of thought, many a visage scarred and seamed but instinct with manhood was better suited to the purposes of art than that of a twentieth century Apollo.

Out of the fulness of your hearts shall ye preach, was a dictum as old as Christianity, concluded the Observer, and one that had stood the test of

time. If the heart was full the artist would be impelled to paint what was worthy of his brush, and to spleen against the un consequential, the debased or the debasing, the brutal or the brutalizing. If it wasn't, God help art, for anything conceived in the refrigerator was more than apt to die a-borning in the frost. We would laugh at a mechanic who would build costly machinery just to see the wheels go round. Why shouldn't we laugh at the artist who was actuated by a like laudable ambition? The purpose of the machine justified the expenditure of money for cog-wheels, pinions, levers, and all the rest of it. Why should not the purpose of the work of art alone justify the effort necessary to produce it? If it had no purpose, then art became a joke, and the artist little more than a juggler in line, form, and color for personal pleasure or profit, with scant regard for the dignity of his art and his duty to his muse and the public.

REPORTED BY THE SALON'S SECRETARY.



RIDING ON THE RAIL
(Type of inconsequential subject)